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ABSTRACT

The use of film to supplement course material can be an excellent way to stimulate critical thinking. Film can be a particularly useful tool in the interpersonal communication course since students are able to observe both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the characters. However, discussion prior to and following the film is important, so that material can be highlighted. Another useful technique is the inclusion of a worksheet students can fill out while watching the film clips. Two films that work well to highlight interpersonal concepts surrounding the self are Albert Brooks' "Defending Your Life" and "Chameleon Street," an independent film by Wendell B. Harris, Jr. A key concept to incorporate into the "Defending Your Life" assignment is "self concept." In the film, Brooks's character, Daniel, crashes his car and finds himself on trial in Judgment City and asked to defend his life. One of the avenues of focus in the film and on the worksheet is whether Daniel's self concept had been altered in any way during the course of the story. "Chameleon Street" is the true story of a Detroit native who, with only a high school education, spent 14 years posing as everything from a Detroit Tigers rookie to a "Time" reporter, surgeon, attorney, and foreign exchange student. The "Chameleon Street" activity begins with a class discussion/review of concepts such as public/private self, residual self, self-handicapping strategies, and communicator style. (Contains activity sheets for both films.) (NKA)

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Issues surrounding the self:

Using the films "Defending Your Life" and "Chameleon Street"

in the interpersonal class

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The use of film to supplement course material can be an excellent way to stimulate critical thinking (Grainer, 1995). Films are one way to reach students with a visual approach to learning. Film can be a particularly useful tool in the interpersonal communication course since students are able to observe both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the characters (Zorn, 1991).

Merely showing entire films or film clips in a classroom does not, however, ensure students are being actively engaged in the material. Discussion prior to and following the film are important steps in processing the material to be highlighted. Another useful technique is to include a worksheet students can fill out while watching the clips. This can increase student awareness of the concepts exemplified.

Two films that work well to highlight interpersonal concepts surrounding the self are "Defending Your Life" and "Chameleon Street." At first glance, these films may seem quite different from each other. But upon a closer look, both movie plots revolve around a main character trying to reinvent his sense of self through communication with others.

"Defending Your Life"

Albert Brooks wrote, directed and stars in the romantic comedy "Defending Your Life." In the film, Brooks plays ad man Daniel Miller who finds himself in Judgment City after he accidentally crashes his BMW into a bus. While in Judgment City, Daniel is put on trial and asked to defend his life (Klawans, 1991; Young, 1991).

This film works best when viewed in its entirety since the fictional world of Judgment City is at first unusual to the viewer and many portions of the movie would be difficult to follow removed from their general context. In order to foster student learning of basic interpersonal

concepts surrounding the self, the following assignment has been developed.

A key concept to incorporate into the "Defending Your Life" assignment is "self-concept." In the class periods leading up to showing the film, interpersonal communication terminology is explained and reviewed. On the day the film will be shown in class (depending on length of class sessions, the film may span more than one class period), the "Defending Your Life" worksheet is distributed to students (see appendix). Students are instructed to review the questions on the worksheet and then to use the sheet to take notes while watching the film. Once they have seen the movie, they will be expected to write a short paper addressing each of these questions. On the date the paper is due, a class discussion should be undertaken to reinforce student understanding of the concepts they dealt with in their papers.

One of the key avenues of focus in the film and the worksheet is the question of whether Daniel's self-concept has been altered in any way during the course of the story. In the film, Daniel is forced to review "clips" of key moments in his life to see if he has truly learned to overcome his fears. At first Daniel views himself as insecure, yet as he is forced to "defend his life" he is also forced to reinterpret his life. The film offers many examples that highlight this gradual change in Daniel's self-concept.

A fun element of the assignment is to ask students to reflect on their personal history and write about the scene they would most like to show a panel at Judgment City in order to defend their own lives. This can lead into a fruitful discussion of how we see ourselves in conjunction with key events in our past.

"Chameleon Street"

A second film activity related to issues surrounding the self in interpersonal

communication, utilizes clips from the independent film "Chameleon Street." Wendell B. Harris, Jr. wrote, directed and stars in this film. The film is based on the true story of Detroit native William Douglas Street, Jr. With only a high school education, Street spent 14 years posing as everything from a Detroit Tigers rookie to a "Time" reporter, surgeon, attorney, and foreign exchange student (Southgate, 1991).

For this activity, the instructor will need to decide whether they want to show the complete film or just select clips. The worksheet for this activity will have the greatest impact if students view the whole film. The film is not commercial Hollywood fare, however, and as Proctor and Alder (1991) caution, one may not want to use foreign language or "art" films extensively since undergraduates tend to react negatively toward them. For this reason, one may want to show only several pertinent clips from "Chameleon Street" to use as jumping off points for class discussion on key concepts surrounding the self.

The "Chameleon Street" activity begins with a class discussion/review of concepts such as: public/private self, residual self, self-handicapping strategies, and communicator style. One can then point out that those among us who are successful "imposters" may be so due to effective communication skills -- that one can alter their public self by learning to pick up on the verbal and nonverbal communication cues surrounding them. Following this brief discussion, the whole film or select clips from the film would be shown. If one opts to show only a few clips, it would be appropriate to give students a brief synopsis of the portions of the film leading up to the clips.

A worksheet to spur on discussion from the film is distributed to students just as the film is about to start. Answers to the questions can be shared with others in an open discussion following the film or students can be asked to write up their responses to the questions as a paper

assignment.

One of the more interesting aspects of this assignment is the ambiguity surrounding the main character. Is one's ability to adapt to each new communication situation ethical? At points in the film the character is blatantly out of line, however there are moments where he is able to use his chameleon-like skills to turn conventions upside down. The film does delve into the mental and emotional price one pays if they are constantly reinventing themselves.

Both "Defending Your Life" and "Chameleon Street" provide excellent examples of how a person's self-concept can impact their interpersonal interactions. By offering students an alternative to a classroom lecture, these movies can provide a way to look at "case histories" of persons whose self-concepts are in a state of flux. These video portraits of two very different people will create useful examples students can explore to broaden their understanding of issues surrounding the self in the interpersonal course.

References

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FILM PAPER - "DEFENDING YOUR LIFE"

In essay form, answer each of the following questions separately. Be specific and thorough in your remarks. Give examples from the film to support each answer. Your paper should be typed, double-spaced and free of typographical and grammatical errors.

1. What is Daniel's self-concept at the beginning of the film? Has it changed by the end? If so, in what way?

2. Can you find an instance where a character is stereotyping someone based on their first impression of them? Explain your example, making sure to mention the stereotype that was formed.

3. Which of the four sections of the Johari Window dominates Julia's interactions throughout the film? Give two examples from the film to support your answer.

4. Can you discover an example of allness in the film? What happened in the scene to lead you to that conclusion?

5. Mark Knapp describes 10 stages that many relationships tend to go through. Choose any three of these stages and give an example to show how you were aware that the characters were at each stage you select. You don't have to focus on the same characters for each stage you pick.

6. For fun: If you had to "defend your life," what "scene" would you most like your judges to review? Why?

WORKSHEET FOR "CHAMELEON STREET"

1. What do you see as the difference between Street's self-concept and his personality?

2. We see Street's public self, but do we ever see his private self?

3. Given the distinctiveness postulate, what attribute do you think Street would highlight for himself?

4. Does Street have high or low self-esteem?

5. What would you consider to be Street's residual self?

6. Does Street ever use self-handicapping strategies?

7. What communicator style does Street use in each of his major encounters?

8. In terms of rhetorical sensitivity, would you consider Street a noble self, rhetorical reflector, or rhetorical sensitive?

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